

**Pope Leo on the 60th Anniversary
of Conciliar Decrees on Priests and Priestly Formation**

“A fidelity that generates the future”

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The author reflects on the recent apostolic letter A Fidelity That Generates the Future. She is a consecrated member of the Servidoras, a member of the Dicastery for Bishops, and the Ordinary Council of the General Secretariat of the Synod.

Pope Leo shows that priests occupy a privileged place in his heart. Even before the Jubilee Year ended, and despite a schedule so packed that “there was not a spare moment,” Pope Leo XIV wrote a deeply moving apostolic letter on ordained ministry for the 60th anniversary of the conciliar decrees *Optatam totius* and *Presbyterorum Ordinis* (1965).

The title is noteworthy: *A fidelity that generates the future*. Why such an enigmatic title? We can surmise the reason lies in declining number of vocations in nearly every part of the world. To address this problem – since words move but example draws – what is more compelling for a young person than a priest who is happy to be a priest? Experiencing this joy that flows from faithfulness, and radiating it through one’s own life, are powerful magnets for new vocations.

Interestingly, the apostolic letter is different from prior papal documents. Aside from his two memorable documents, *Pastores dabo vobis* (1992) and *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* (1994), Saint John Paul II, wrote annually to priests on Holy Thursday. Benedict XVI addressed a letter to priests for the Year for Priests (2009–2010), and Francis turned to them through a letter marking the 160th anniversary of the death of the Curé d’Ars (2019). But Pope Leo departs from previous pontiffs in that – as he himself states – “I address this Apostolic Letter to the entire People of God, in order to examine together the identity and function of the ordained ministry in the light of what the Lord is asking of the Church today, continuing the great work of renewal begun by the Second Vatican Council.” In other words, he broadened the audience.

Why does he involve all of us who are baptized around questions on the identity and role of ordained ministers? Why does Pope Leo ask everyone to rediscover these Decrees, which were framed “in view of sound doctrinal development”? Are we lacking a deeper, more up-to-date understanding of the Council’s ecclesiology? Is there something new that can help priests to feel more at ease and fruitful in the midst of God’s People and in their own distinctive calling?

The text offers concrete, familiar guidance, as in its invitation to *reaffirm that first "yes,"* returning daily to one's own Sea of Galilee where Jesus asked Peter: "Do you love me?" Or in referencing the need to let "the voice of the Lord" who loves, chooses, and calls each one, resound in the heart's memory: the moment of the call from which flows interior unity with Christ and therefore the calling to give oneself to God and his holy People. It is striking that the Pope emphasizes at least five times that the demands of faithfulness must be lived "every day." Listening to the Word of God, celebrating the sacraments – especially the Eucharist – and closeness to those on the margin are what guarantee the grace of daily conversion, keeping the gift received alive.

The letter demonstrates a deep understanding of the *existential situations* of priests today. It closely confronts and accompanies their fragilities and wounds. Priests are so often victims of exhausting activism, burdened by pressures to produce results, or conversely, tempted by quietism and a hardening of the heart in order to keep "functioning." They frequently experience fatigue, discouragement, loneliness, and inner emptiness, along with the anxiety of being always connected, and the pain caused by a lack of communion or discord. For his part, the Holy Father does not shy away from naming the weight borne by those who have left ministry and the crisis of abuse.

Priestly fraternity, which has existed since Jesus commissioned the twelve apostles, finds expression in the hope that dioceses will do everything possible to "invest in and promote possible forms of community life" as indispensable antidotes to individualism, the other face of loneliness, and self-referentiality which goes hand in hand with a lack of mutual care and ongoing formation.

This priestly fraternity is an imperative to be cultivated from the time of seminary formation, which the Pope describes as the "training ground" of the heart. It is essential that priests relate deeply to *other baptized persons as their sisters and brothers*, ensuring that Christian communities do not live turned in on themselves but carry out a genuine *missionary conversion* under the guidance of their bishops, to evangelize "every dimension of our society, especially culture, economics, and politics."

If faithfulness is the thread running through this apostolic letter, the key to reading it is *synodality*. In a synodal Church molded by the breath of the Spirit, priests occupy a specific and unmistakable place. A "school of synodality" can enable them to move toward conversions in relationships that foster ever more *collegial leadership* styles when guiding Christian communities and can overcome "the model of exclusive leadership". This will favor cooperation among all members of God's People, in a differentiated co-responsibility where charisms and ministries of all the baptized contribute together to the Church's mission. Moreover, this 'school' will preserve priests from "identifying sacramental authority with power," lest they exalt themselves above others.

According to the Pope, what is new in the Final Document of the recent Assembly of the Synod of Bishops can be fulfilled if priests, together with lay faithful, welcome the Holy Spirit's call to open their hearts decisively towards more participatory processes. Addressing this letter to all God's people and calling for both meditation and action, is a powerful synodal gesture.